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Message from the Director:

Substance use among Vermont teens has reached alarming proportions. According to the *1995 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, alcohol use, cigarette smoking, marijuana and cocaine use have all increased since 1993. A third of students were offered or sold drugs on school property. Nearly one-third of 8th graders have used inhalants. More younger students are trying cigarettes. More students are having sex after using alcohol or drugs. We estimate that there are roughly 21,000 Vermont adolescents in need of intervention services, and about 4,000 in need of treatment services.

In the long run, the key is preventing substance abuse before it occurs. But according to the survey results, it already is occurring. The question for schools and communities is: How can we preserve prevention programs, and ensure that teens who need more than prevention services have access to intervention and treatment?

Student Assistance Programs (SAP's) offer a cost-effective solution to bridge the gap between prevention and treatment. SAP's consist of teams of school staff, counselors, or a combination of both who are trained to identify and intervene with students who are experiencing substance abuse problems.

This report provides an overview of SAP's: what they are, how they work, evidence for their effectiveness, and implementation issues. For the first time, we can show that in addition to reducing teen substance use, SAP's reduce:

- school violence
- vandalism
- pregnancies

For the 60% of Vermont schools that don't currently have an SAP, I hope this report will encourage you to develop one. For those schools that already have an SAP, I hope this report will encourage you to continue and even strengthen your program.

If you have any comments or questions about this report, please contact Bill Apao at the Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs (802-241-2181).

Tom Perras, Director

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“The abuse of alcohol and other drugs is the number one threat to the health and well-being of today’s youth.”

--William Bennett, *What Works: Schools without Drugs*

Introduction

Adolescence sets the stage for adulthood. Teens make decisions and develop habits that have life-long consequences. Some of the most important have to do with the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Cigarette smoking is the single greatest cause of preventable death, and is a habit that nearly always begins in adolescence. Heavy drinking among students has been linked to physical fighting, vandalism, and academic problems. Drug use has been shown to harm psychological and physical health, lower school performance, and to increase involvement with law enforcement authorities.¹

Furthermore, research has shown that drug use progresses in stages beginning with tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and then moving to "harder" drugs.² Therefore, every substance abuse problem is a potentially serious problem.

This booklet focuses on one effective means of addressing adolescent substance use and abuse: student assistance programs (SAP's). SAP's consist of trained student assistance counselors, student assistance teams, or both. SAP counselors and teams give educational presentations that help prevent substance use, identify students with problems, coordinate support groups to help students cope with substance use, and may refer students to community programs for treatment. By being located within the school, SAP's help to build better linkages among students, their families, school personnel, and community service agencies. The topics covered in this booklet include:

I. What are the Problems in Vermont schools?: Summary of the problems using risk indicators for students, schools, and communities in Vermont.

II. What are Student Assistance Programs?: Definitions and models of SAP's.

III. Do SAP's Work?: Evidence for the effectiveness of SAP's using Vermont survey data.

IV. What is required to implement an SAP?: Summary of implementation issues including costs, funding methods, staffing, training, and necessary supports.

I. What are the Problems in Vermont Schools?

Students at risk. The 1995 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)³ gives a disturbing profile of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use among eighth through twelfth grade students in Vermont.

% Students using the following substances during the past 30 days	1993	1995
Used alcohol	48	53
Smoked cigarettes	31	38
Smoked marijuana	16	29
Used cocaine	2	4

In addition, during their lifetime, 19% of students have used illicit drugs such as PCP or LSD, 27% have used inhalants, and 4% have used a needle to inject illegal drugs. According to the Vermont Department of Education⁴, 1087 students were suspended and 17 were expelled for alcohol and other drug possessions during the 1993-1994 school year.

The YRBS indicated increases in other risk behaviors as well, many of which are associated with substance use. For example, 28% of students reported seriously considering suicide during the past year; and during the past 30 days, 21% of students carried weapons and 12% carried weapons on school property.

"The public and administration are in denial [about substance abuse]--Vermont student

Schools at Risk: Student support services declining. According to the Vermont Department of Education⁴, the percentage of schools having alcohol and other drug support services has actually declined since 1993. Possible

reasons for the decline include:

- lack of training around drug issues
- lack of funding
- teachers and school staff are already over-extended.

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% Vermont schools with support services	1993	1994
System to identify and refer students in distress	96	88
Written support & referral agreement with outside agency	64	63
In-school support & referral team (including untrained)	97	59

Communities at Risk: Another reason that student support services might be declining is the lack of community support. Unlike some other states, Vermont does not dedicate or set aside funding for SAP's. It is estimated, however, that substance abuse costs Vermonters \$582 million each year (or about \$1,000 for every Vermont resident) to pay for unnecessary health care, criminal justice expenditures, and lost productivity.

Given the demonstrated cost-effectiveness of substance abuse treatment⁵, can the state and communities afford to ignore students' needs for intervention and treatment?

II. What are Student Assistance Programs?

Student assistance programs can take two forms: student assistance teams and student assistance counselors. Some schools have both a counselor and support team. As of 1995, there were 103 schools with SAP teams, 7 with SAP counselors and 26 with both.

According to the Student Assistance Counselor Network⁶, SAP teams are composed of school personnel such as administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, school nurses, and a member who is certified or supervised by an addictions counselor. An SAP counselor is a certified alcohol and drug counselor, and may be a school employee or an employee of an outside agency which contracts with the school. SAP counselors are required to have 4,000 hours of supervised work in alcohol and drug abuse, and have on-going clinical supervision.

*"You've taught me
some of the greatest
things I know. Thank
you!"--Vermont student*

What do SAP's do? SAP counselors and teams identify students with substance use problems, intervene, and when necessary, refer them to community agencies for more specialized or intensive services. Since SAP counselors and teams are continually interacting with students, they can identify students having problems

through direct observation. Students may also be referred to counselors by teachers, parents, peers, or may seek help themselves. The counselors then assess the students and may refer them to local human services agencies for treatment or may provide in-house counseling. SAP teams and counselors follow-up with students to ensure they obtain the treatment they need.

SAP counselors and teams also:

- give educational presentations to students and community groups
- work with community resources to develop services for students
- train school staff to deal with troubled students
- meet with concerned families
- increase awareness of substance use problems in the community
- allow teachers to concentrate on education instead of having to deal with substance use
- run educational support groups

SAP's complement existing programs such as school-based health clinics, prevention programs such as D.A.R.E. and Here's Looking at You, 2000, peer leadership programs, and community mental health agencies.

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"Thanks for breaking my shell and letting me speak."--Vermont student

What is the rationale for SAP's? Surveys indicate that students who have problems with tobacco, alcohol or other drugs, are most likely to turn to a friend for help, but are also willing to talk to school personnel or counselors.³

However, many school personnel are not trained to deal with substance abuse problems. SAP's provide someone who is trained and able to help students who turn to them.

The SAP's are modeled after employee assistance programs (EAP's). EAP's were originally created as employers recognized the detrimental effects of substance abuse on their employees and on productivity. At the same time, research was beginning to demonstrate that substance abuse treatment was effective in reducing employer costs and increasing worker performance. EAP's were developed using in-house counselors to provide early intervention and treatment for substance abuse or other personal problems. EAP's have been shown to decrease:

- absenteeism
- disciplinary actions
- grievances
- on-the-job accidents and visits to medical units
- worker's compensation payments.⁷

EAP's are not only effective, they are also cost effective. By one estimate, each dollar invested in an EAP returns from \$3 to \$15 in increased efficiency and productivity.⁸ Companies such as McDonnell Douglas estimate a minimum of 4:1 savings-to-investment return for employee assistance counselors, which saves companies millions of dollars.⁹

Like EAP's, student assistance programs provide on-site support for substance use and related problems. But in addition, SAP's are designed to address the specific developmental needs of adolescents. Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller's¹⁰ research on children's ability to cope with stress, or "resiliency", has found that successful school prevention programs:

- strengthen the ties between the student or family and the community
- teach the students "life" skills such as how to make good decisions
- set and consistently reinforce expectations, such as school policies.

A student assistance program can help meet these goals because the counselor is a liaison between students, the school, and community mental health

agencies. The counselors help the students follow through on referrals and help them make better choices regarding alcohol or drug use. Counselors help the students maintain a norm of non-use and help them resist the pressure to use.

"You have really helped me make some tough decisions [that] I wouldn't have been able to do alone"--Vermont student

When a school has an SAP counselor or team, the community is sending a message to students that drug use is a primary concern, and that help is available. Finally, an SAP counselor supports school staff to make consistent enforcement choices around drug use policies.

III. Do SAP's Work?

Evaluations of SAP's in several other states have demonstrated the effectiveness of SAP's in:

- reducing overall substance use (Washington¹¹), and specifically alcohol and marijuana use (New York¹² and Wisconsin¹³)
- increasing school attendance (New York, Wisconsin, and California¹³) and decreasing drop-outs (California and Pennsylvania¹⁴)
- decreasing disciplinary actions (Wisconsin and Pennsylvania) and vandalism (Wisconsin)
- improving students' grades and staff morale (Wisconsin)

What about the effectiveness of student assistance programs in Vermont?

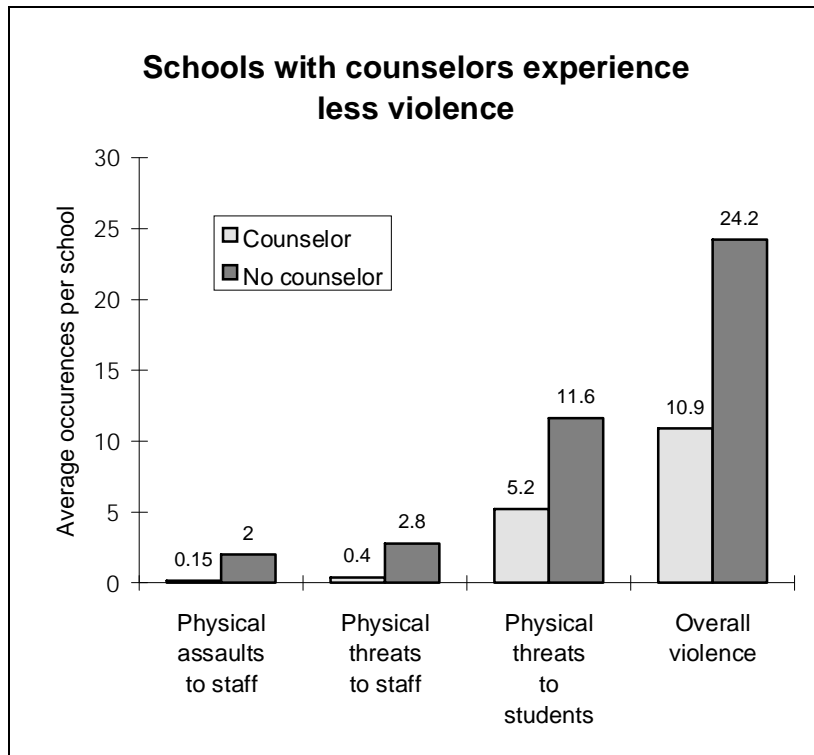
To evaluate Vermont SAP's, we compared schools with an SAP counselor and/or a trained student assistance team, to schools without a counselor and/or team. We used data from the Vermont Department of Education's *Summary Report for Act 51 and Comprehensive Health Education for 1994-1995*¹⁵ and the *1995 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)*³. The *Act 51 Report* summarizes each school on its comprehensive drug and alcohol use prevention programs. The YRBS is a student questionnaire on the risk behaviors that are most responsible for morbidity and mortality among adolescents.

To control for important pre-existing differences among schools, we matched 29 Vermont middle and high schools on community wealth, school size, and years with a student assistance program. This procedure strengthens the likelihood that differences among schools on *Act 51* or YRBS results are due to the presence or absence of an SAP.

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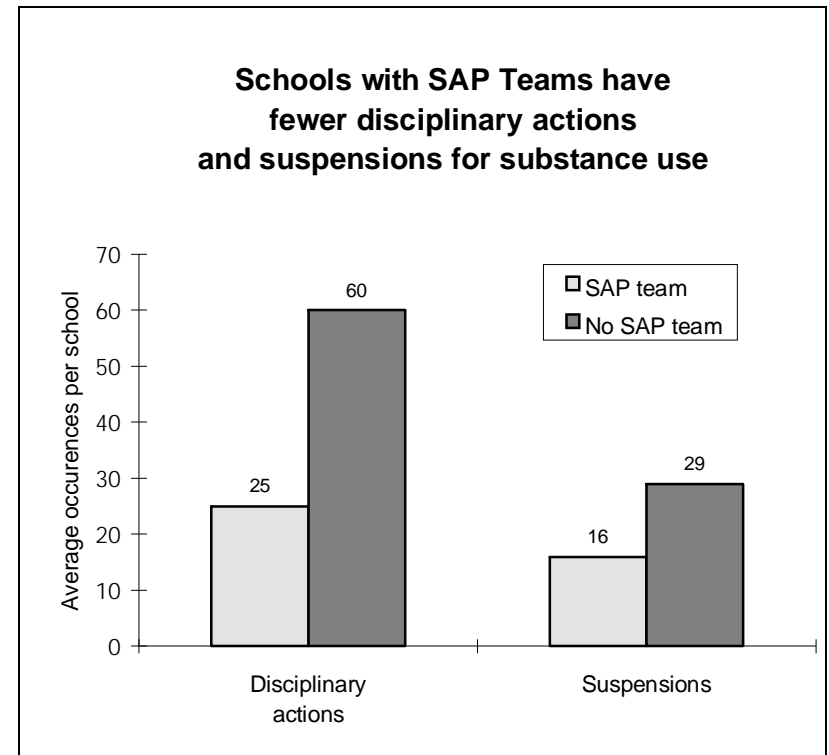
According to school personnel (*Act 51 data*), **having an SAP counselor** was associated with:

- **13 times fewer** PHYSICAL ASSAULTS
- **seven times fewer** THREATS to staff by students
- **half** the PHYSICAL THREATS to students by other students
- **half** the VIOLENT incidences in schools
- **four times more** student SELF-REFERRALS for drug use or distress.



Having an **SAP team** was associated with:

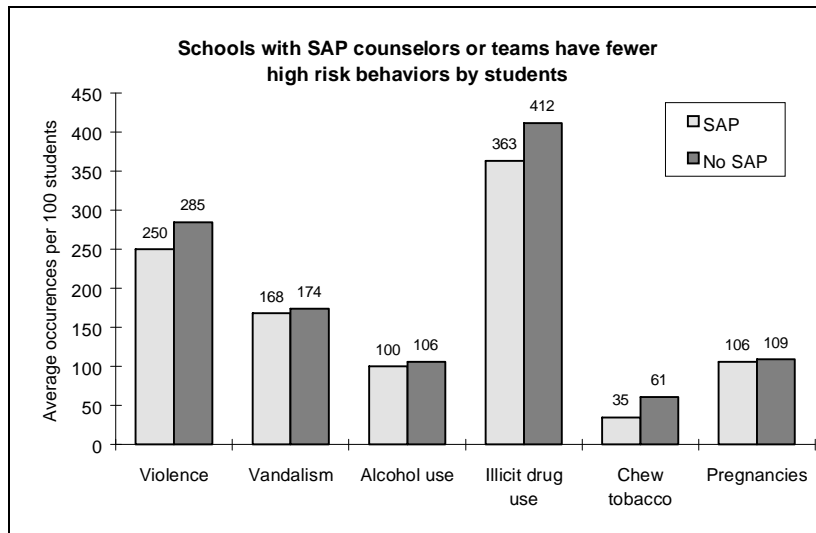
- **less than half** the disciplinary actions
- **almost half** the suspensions for DRUG USE and DRUG SALES by students.



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According to students (YRBS data), having an SAP counselor or student assistance team was associated with:

- **fewer** PHYSICAL THREATS, FIGHTS, and WEAPON carrying
- **less** VANDALISM
- **less** DRINKING, use of ILLICIT DRUGS, and CHEWING TOBACCO
- **fewer** PREGNANCIES.



These findings are consistent with those from other states, and suggest that:

- having an SAP counselor or team appears to lower the prevalence of risk behaviors
- having only a counselor is more effective than having only a team
- having **both** a counselor and a team is the most effective SAP.

Finally, just as EAP's and treatment for adults have proven to be cost-effective, it seems reasonable to expect that the cost of SAP's would be returned through reduced costs associated with vandalism, physical injuries, dropouts, and teen pregnancies.

Success Stories. Although unquantifiable, some of SAP's other effects are extremely important.

“Judy” was a Vermont high school student who experienced many personal problems while just a teenager. She was a dedicated and happy student until her parents divorced her second year. Not knowing how to cope with her family crisis, she soon fell into a deep depression. Her lack of concentration affected her grades. Her friends were at first supportive, but then became tired of her moods and ‘complaining’. Gradually, she felt she had fewer and fewer people to turn to. Then she started to use drugs to numb her depression, which lead to other problems. She was headed in a downward spiral. She finally decided she needed to talk to a professional, but someone she also considered a friend. Her student assistance counselor not only helped with her depression, but also helped her make better choices around substance use. She is currently at a Vermont college and is coping better. She says, “I don’t think I could have made it without [my student assistance counselor]...[He] caught my alcoholism and depression...I would have been worse off down the road if I had not known of [these services]...especially when I went to college where there is more pressure to drink.”

“George is a Vermont high school student who’s best friend, “Alan”, committed suicide. When George had problems, he used to talk to Alan. But now that he is going through his worst crisis, he feels he has no one to talk to. He feels no one understands his grief. And then his girlfriend told him she might be pregnant. He doesn’t know what to do. He talked to his student assistance counselor, which made him realize that others care and that he has someone to turn to. Now he his making better life choices. As he said to his student assistance counselor, “I want to thank you for everything you have done for me. You have helped me make some tough decisions and work through things I wouldn’t have been able to do alone. I can’t imagine what I would have done if I hadn’t been able to talk to you...You made me feel special.”

IV. What is Required to Implement an SAP?

*“School boards must make an honest commitment of time, resources, and dollars...Who suffers when the program fails? It is the at-risk young person.”
Lawrence Newman, President, ComSAP¹⁶*

Implementation issues can be grouped into the following categories: necessary supports, operations, training, and funding methods. Most of the recommendations are based on a 1995 survey of the Student Assistance Counselors in Vermont¹⁷, and a review of practices and minimum standards established in other states.

Necessary Supports. Successful SAP's are strongly supported by both the school administration and the community. More specifically, support from school administrators includes:

- commitment to having a counselor on-site a minimum of two days a week
- long term commitment to the program, and stable funding for at least 3-4 years
- office space on campus
- use the counselor as a school and community resource, not as a disciplinarian
- educate themselves about SAP's and inform students and community about SAP services.

Operations. At a minimum, SAP teams and counselors must be prepared to:

- meet each week for case management (for teams)
- inform students, parents and school directors about SAPs
- develop and revise existing drug policies
- negotiate and implement agreements with local mental health agencies
- maintain continual supervision by trained professionals.⁶

Training. It is essential that SAP team members and counselors receive thorough training on all aspects of developing and maintaining an effective SAP at their school, as well as training on alcohol and drug issues. In Vermont, low cost SAP team training is available through the Vermont Free Masons. They pay for all room and board for team members at the training, while the Vermont Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs and the Vermont Department of

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Education coordinate the seminars. The purpose of this training is to assist schools in the creation or improvement of SAP teams and focus on how to identify, document, and refer students with problems, as well as how to revise school substance use policies. Trainings are held twice a year: once for high school teams and once for elementary school teams.

Funding Methods. In recent years, federal funds have been used for SAP's, specifically Drug Free Schools and Communities Grants. However, 1/4 of those federal funds have been cut forcing schools and communities to find alternative funding for SAP's.

Some states dedicate certain taxes and fees to fund SAP's. For example, Rhode Island uses money collected from cigarette taxes and traffic violations to pay for 80% of the costs of SAP's, with the remaining 20% matched by the school. This method provides sufficient funding for a full time, Master's level counselor.¹⁸ In Westchester county, New York, the school pays 60% of the SAP team costs.¹⁸

SAP's are also funded through partnerships among community agencies, such as police departments. In other states, SAP's are funded through charitable agencies such as United Way, or private grant foundations such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

In addition, communities or sponsoring agencies can apply for federal grants to create demonstration programs or research projects from agencies such as NIAAA (National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism), CSAP (The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention), CSAT (The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment), and NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse). Finally, communities can apply to the Vermont Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs for federal Drug Free Schools grants. However, the availability and amounts of grants change from year to year.

Conclusions

There is reasonably strong evidence that Student Assistance Programs can be effective in:

- reducing negative social behaviors, such as violence and substance use
- increasing the ability of teens to cope with crises
- maintaining a positive drug-free environment for students, families, school personnel and communities
- reducing costs associated with school violence, vandalism, and other high risk behaviors.

Although Vermont has made some improvements in it's school services, the needs of many Vermont teens are not being addressed. SAP's bridge the gap between prevention and treatment by not only identifying teens in crisis and referring them to community mental health agencies, but also by promoting positive norms and values. Schools need SAP teams and counselors in order to enhance the effectiveness of substance use policies and prevention education programs.

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